

Created to love, commanded to live, forbidden to kill—where does that leave VAD?

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‘Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.’ This verse from Rom 12:15 reminds us to stay the course with those dealing with end-of-life issues.

Voluntary assisted dying (VAD) is a very distressing topic, so some may choose to not read this article. Others may read it and be distressed by the language. This is understandable and acknowledged. So, let us rest in the comfort of the only one who can give the required comfort in all and every circumstance—our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, ‘the same yesterday, today, and forever’ (Heb 13:8).

We live in a world where everyone learns that their bodies will one day die. The conversations and rituals around death are determined by the relationships that we have with each other and by our relationship with God.

In the biblical beginning we were created for the Creator’s glory to love, live in joy and perpetuate life (Gen 1:28). We knew nothing of temptation, human sin and mortal death (Gen 1:31). But we were created with a free will to choose to listen and follow God (Gen 2:16–17) or to choose to listen to temptation (Gen 3:15) and to sin against God (Gen 3:6). The temptation to sin with its subsequent fruition changed it all (Gen 3:7) and humanity was left with the struggle of temptation, its sinful self and mortal death (Rom 6:23). However, it was also left with God’s promise of salvation through the one born of the woman who would crush the head of the tempter (Gen 3:15). God promises and gives life—the fullness of life (John 10:10), Satan seeks to take away life—the destruction of the fullness of life, and God metes out death, the wages of sin (Acts 5:5, 10). So, whilst we are created with life and the desire for life, sin, death and the devil constantly distort what is God-pleasing in regard to life and death. We do know that everything that God does is for life and His glory (John 10:1) and so we have God’s guidance for us in the fifth commandment: ‘Do not kill’ (Deut 5:17) and in the God-pleasing choice of life (Deut 30:15–20). The righteous who live in the hope of the promise pass on these words down through the generations (Joel 1:3). But the commandment could not be kept (Neh 9:26–30, Isa 65:3) so God sent His only Son to fulfil this commandment (Matt 5:17) and take on our sin and its wages by being put to death on the cross (1 Pet 2:24). He then was raised to life and returned to the Father (Rom 6:9) from whence the Holy Spirit was sent to guide all believers (John 14:15–16) so that in Christ they could follow the fifth commandment and the commandment to choose life. So, the God-pleasing life is one of the fullness of life with the passing of our mortal bodies from this earthly life to the next being entirely in God’s hands (Job 33:4). God cares for us in all the processes of life, and is with us as we live our lives. This includes fighting for life in the face of danger and using life to prepare for death. There is no suggestion

anywhere that God ever wished us to suffer and die. Suffering and death (Gen 3:16–19) are the consequences of our choice to sin (Rom 6:23), consequences which God Himself set in His love, justice, mercy and compassion. These consequences were also meted out to His Son (Isa 53:3) for our salvation (John 3:16).

So then, what is this issue of voluntary assisted dying (VAD) that is before us today? In its simplest form, it is a legal framework that allows a person to end their life with the assistance of others under conditions that are approved by the civil authorities so that no criminal act requiring prosecution is involved. As seen above, the biblical witness does not approve of this practice which would be considered in biblical terms as killing oneself and asking others to be involved in the killing (where killing is the taking of the life of oneself or of another). It is apparent then that this civil law is at odds with God's Word. This can create a crisis for the conscience when it is forced to choose between obeying God or obeying 'Caesar' when the civil law does not take this conscience issue into account. There is no peace apart from 'the peace that knows no understanding' (Phil 4:7). The situation may even create divisions between Christians in their responses. It can result in Christians even justifying these actions as being God-pleasing if it seemingly resolves some conflicts. But an action is not determined as being sinful by its outcome or by the intention behind it, but by whether it is in line with God and His Word. We may be angry and frustrated by the situation and this is all to be expected. Even then, Christ tells us to be angry, but do not sin. Sometimes this calls for action and sometimes for silence.

The Word of God is always the basis for the Christian response to VAD—a response that includes instruction and guidance and pastoral care. VAD is not a system of palliative care nor does it refer to the situation where you allow someone to die when that becomes the appropriate course of action. It is the deliberate and planned taking of human life. The greatest difficulties with VAD are any types of coercion which may occur to ensure that it takes place and the burdening of the conscience so that God's promise of the assurance of salvation is in jeopardy. The reassurance is that there is always redemption in Christ for those who sin or are coerced or manipulated into sinning. This redemption comes from our God whose law is not at odds with His compassion.

VAD will always be controversial. Now that the VAD law is in place, there needs to be a clear choice in spaces that have VAD and those that do not. We need to seek the Lord and His mercy to help to resolve the issues surrounding VAD. We need to seek Him in such a way that repents of blaming Him for our suffering and allows the lament, praise and comfort of the Psalms to be heard in the reality of the enormous and overwhelming suffering which VAD seeks to address. Jesus is with the sufferer and with the carer—'Come, Lord Jesus' (Rev 22:20b).

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